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CENSORSHIP ACTION ANGERS SCIENTISTS

Pentagon Security Move Bars 100 Technological Papers

By PHILIP M. BOFFEY

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Sept. 4 — The Defense Department blocked the presentation of about 100 technical papers just before they were to have been delivered at an international convention on optical engineering held in San Diego late last month.

The last-minute security crackdown, which received little notice at the time, appears to have been the most sweeping effort yet by the Reagan Administration to prevent the unauthorized disclosure of sensitive technical data that officials believe could be of military use to the Soviet Union or its allies.

The abrupt nature of the action disturbed some top scientists and even other Government officials, with George A. Keyworth 2d, President Reagan's science adviser, calling the incident "both unfortunate and ill-timed."

The action disrupted the 26th annual international technical symposium of the Society of Photo-Optical Instrumentation Engineers by eliminating about one of every six papers scheduled to be presented.

The papers that were withdrawn covered such advancements in optical technology as small mirrors for laser communications between satellites and submerged submarines; infrared optics; airborne reconnaissance sensors; and other microelectronics research.

A Defense Department official who played a key role in blocking many of the papers said he had done so partly because they contained sensitive technological data and partly because of the presence of Soviet and other foreign scientists at the convention.

The official, who declined to be identified, said the crackdown reflected "a greater sensitivity and a tightening up on what can be released in an international forum, particularly one that involves the Soviets."

Mr. Keyworth acknowledged that "some reconciliation" was needed be-

tween the "legitimate concern" of the Defense Department on the transfer of sensitive technology and the desire of many scientists for "an unfettered pursuit of research" and freedom to speak at international conferences.

However, Richard Wollensak, a vice president of Ittek Corporation, a major electronics company, who is president of the photo-optical society, said his "major gripe" was that the Defense Department intervention came "too late in the game" to allow an orderly clearance procedure.

An account of the incident is contained in the current issue of Science News, a weekly magazine that had a reporter at the convention. The magazine said that the Government's censorship actions "appear to be unprecedented in their timing, in the large number of papers removed and in the scope of the papers' content."

Military Contracts Involved

Although the conference had been advertised for months, Pentagon officials raised serious objections only two or three weeks before the meeting. The most sensitive papers reported on work supported by military contracts, thus giving Pentagon officials rights to review the data before public presentation.

The Pentagon reviewers concluded that some of the papers submitted to them for clearance contained information that required a license under the International Traffic in Arms Regulations before they could be presented at a conference involving foreign scientists.

There are conflicting and unsubstantiated reports that some sensitive papers had already been cleared at lower levels by the armed services only to be censored later when higher officials became concerned about the presence of Soviet scientists.

According to one Government official who attended the conference, the military authorities sent notices to the authors shortly before the conference advising them to obtain the appropriate clearances. The Pentagon also sent a team to the meeting to warn the scheduled speakers personally. And just before the conference began the Commerce Department warned the sponsoring society to be sure that all speakers were adhering to Commerce Department rules on technology export as well.

Blizzard of Warnings

This blizzard of warnings left many speakers confused about their rights to free speech and just how sensitive their presentations were considered by the Government. "People didn't know what to do," said one participant. "Rather than take a chance of violating some regulation, they decided not to present their papers."

How many of the 100 withdrawn papers actually contain sensitive information is uncertain. The authors can still seek a license to present the data and it is possible that many, if not most, of the withdrawn papers will eventually be published.

About 2,700 technical experts attended the symposium and a related international congress on high-speed photography held Aug. 22-27. A few angry participants, some of whom had traveled thousands of miles to hear papers that were not delivered, have demanded that the society return their registration fees.

Soviet Science Held 'Dependent'

The Pentagon official who had a role in banning the presentations said it was "obvious" that many of the papers "should not have been presented." He said the Reagan Administration had come to realize that "Soviet science and technology are very dependent on access to Western data."

By obtaining the latest technical information from the United States, he contended, the Soviet Union is able to avoid false starts in its own research, thus saving time and money. It is also able to develop early countermeasures to American military advances, he said, which "really bugs us."

The official said the authors and contracting concerns were at fault for failing to get early clearance. However, another Government official who attended the conference accused the Defense Department of "bureaucratic overreaction" in the late demand for adherence to clearance rules.

In a statement, the photo-optical society expressed "regrets that many of those in attendance were unable to obtain the information which might otherwise have been available." But it acknowledged that the Government had a responsibility both "to protect the national interest" and to insure "the free and unencumbered flow of information necessary to the advancement of American science and technology."

The group said it would work with the Government "to assure that a similar situation need not occur again."